

notes from an internet girlhood



Three Red
Roses
(uncommon)

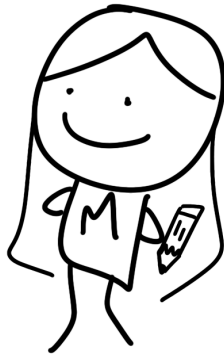
mariah eppes



mariah eppes

the more generational
arguments I see (and make)
the more I hate them.

instead, I'm only going to
write memories when I
write about the internet.



BEGINNINGS: entertainment/nostalgia

First we were in the pursuit of games. These websites were advertised on television, which I watched constantly. CartoonNetwork.com and Nick.com had flash games featuring all your favorite characters.

The memories of these games are memories of sounds, songs, and finger gestures: the magical explosion sound of Buttercup's digital pillow hitting one of her sisters (*Powerpuff Girls: Pillow Fight*), the sizzling of the digital burger getting darker before Spongebob flipped it (*Flip or Flop*). Press the up-arrow key quickly and repeatedly to move. The midi jingles mimicked the music from the shows as closely as possible.

It's hard to conjure these things to mind unprompted, but with the help of YouTube I can view the games—people have uploaded videos. The comments are outpourings of love and reminiscences. *I loved this game!!!, I cant believe i'm 25 years old, simpler times <3*. These videos bring the games back in perfect form. Sounds, songs, finger gestures.

Neopets.

The first world I inhabited online was Neopets.com. Or, Neopia, rather. In 2002ish, I had a “kids” account, but found out quickly that desirable site features were blocked for anyone under 13. So, naturally, I made a new email address and a new account with a fake birthday. My fake birth year was always 1989. (What a trip, when your real birth year was finally eligible for unrestricted accounts!)

Neopets was famous, eventually ubiquitous; blocked in school computer labs. The site was visible as a brand in the real world: Limited Too merchandise, TV ads. But this was less than 10% of what Neopets actually *was*. The general orientation of the player-to-the-game was that you—the owner of the account—were the guardian of your pets, who all had distinct personalities. You could spend your time on Neopets in a million ways: collecting items, saving Neopoints to change your pet’s appearance or obtain a rare item, designing web pages for your pets, contributing to the Neopian newspaper, entering art or writing contests, watching the Neopian Stock Market, battling your pets, participating in a guild, or chatting on the forums.

My main friend on Neopets (Neofriend) was a girl from Belgium. She was a few years older than me, and we had decided to roleplay our pets together and develop their relationship.

Sites like Neopets, which were intended for children, always came with the risk of being “frozen.” Your account could be frozen by The Neopets Team (TNT) if you broke any rules, especially rules about “adult themes.” I was terrified of being frozen. My account meant more to me than I could properly express. Neopets occupied the majority of my thoughts, all the time.

My Neofriend started a roleplay that involved our pets being together in an apartment in a city. I remember her writing a scene in which her pet asked mine if he wanted beer, wine, or a mixed drink. I had no idea what a mixed drink was. I could sense that she was trying to gear this into a romantic place for our pets, which I wasn’t entirely against (a preteen hopeless romantic!). I wrote back some fluff, anxious about breaking the rules. We did this for a while, back and forth, by Neomail.

It must have been near Valentine’s Day. I remember daydreaming all day at school about sending Three Red Roses (a virtual item) to my Neofriend, and then starting a Valentine’s Day-

related scene for our pets. When I got home, I went to my Neofriend's profile, and in big letters, it said that her account had been frozen.

I was devastated. My Neofriend, abruptly yanked out of my life. The loss was intangible, unexplainable; nothing had *happened*. I was okay. But I was not okay.

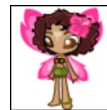
A few days later, she reappeared with a new account and we celebrated. But we decided it would be better if our Neopets were just friends.



Three Red
Roses
(uncommon)



Secret Avatars:
167



Furcadia.

In middle school, I joined a new game, introduced to me by a friend: a free MMO called Furcadia (in the reading I did before writing these reflections, I learned that Furcadia is the longest-running social MMORPG of all time).

Furcadia was a natural extension of life on Neopets. Roleplaying was the main “point” of the game, though it spiraled out and ballooned into endless variations, some supported by and some dissident to the structure intended for the game. The environments in Furcadia hosted “dreams,” which were different worlds to play in. Some dreams were made by whoever ran Furcadia, but many (if not most) were player-created. The player-created part immediately captured my imagination. Later, I would spend hours in Furcadia’s ancillary Dream-Maker program, trying to make my own worlds.

But first I followed my friend from school around. I made a male avatar, thinking nothing of it; the male wolf had better art than the female. We played elaborate games inside player-created dreams.

Over a summer vacation, my school friend stopped logging in as much and we drifted apart. I explored other dreams on my own. These dreams were roleplay-based, but there was always a location in the dream for casual talking. I made new friends. The problem was, since none of these new friends had known me in real life (irl), all of them assumed I was a boy. We referred to each other mostly by our characters' names, but people started asking, "What's your irl name?"

"Zack," I typed, one day.

I always used fake names. What did it matter if this one was a boy's name?

A slippery slope. Before I knew it I was masquerading as a twelve-year-old boy named Zack, and kept up the ruse for nearly two years.

I tried to keep most facts the same, to avoid being caught in a lie. I told them I had a twin sister (which was true! or did I say twin little sisters?). I told them I liked to skateboard, because that was something I thought boys did. (Having no brothers, few male cousins who I rarely saw, and mostly female friends, I had no clue what boys did.)

Someone asked me what I looked like. I googled a picture of a young teen boy with dyed black hair and a lip ring.

“You’re cute!!” my friend typed.

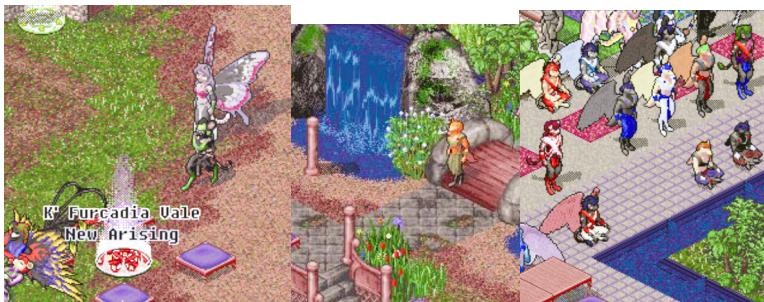
In what seemed like no time, my Furcadian identity had two distinct facets that tended to overlap. Roleplaying was not as clear-cut on Furcadia as it had been on Neopets, because, of course, you *were* your character. My character—separate from “Zack”—had an arc, a social status. A “mate.” But my character’s female “mate” had a female human behind her, and the female human acted like she kind of had a crush on “Zack,” too.

She wanted to roleplay sex between our characters—and wanted me to provide much more than an alcohol preference. I was hilariously out of my depth. But I managed it okay. I had not lied about my age on Furcadia, so any naivety about what a guy should do during sex must have been chalked up to my youth. Most people claimed to be older than me, but lying about your age was common, so it’s hard to know for sure.

I was well-liked in the dream. Everything might have continued that way without a hitch. But I made a mistake.

Shortly after joining Furcadia, I joined another internet community: Idolforums.com. I watched American Idol obsessively as a preteen, and the forum had people who were just as obsessed as I was.

But these two internet worlds had vastly different purposes, a bifurcation which would come to dominate many online environments over the course of the 2000s and 2010s. On Idolforums, I was supposed to be *me*. On Furcadia, I was *not me*. This simultaneity of digital identity—not to mention the management of two emotionally-overwhelming internet addictions—would ultimately prove too unwieldy for me.



INTERLUDE: fear / nostalgia

The primary fear about the internet when I was a kid was predators—an evil adult was coming for you. We were warned about predators by parents and teachers and PSAs and Chris Hansen. I always used fake names and felt generally anxious about giving too much real information.

Once, I googled myself just for fun, and found my full name in a fanfiction of the TV show *Numb3rs*. The family in this TV show had my last name, and the fanfiction writer had somehow conjured “Mariah Lynn Eppes” as the name for her OC (original character). I commented on the fic: *it’s crazy because Mariah Lynn Eppes is actually my name, lol!!* A few minutes later, I got scared and deleted the comment.

There wasn’t much talk about addiction as something to fear about the internet, despite the fact that I was hopelessly addicted by age 10. I often felt like I couldn’t control my need for it. My dad’s attempts to enforce time limits on my computer use did nothing to help, and only made the separation anxiety worse. I couldn’t

explain to anyone what it was like to live on Neopets, Furcadia, and Idolforums. I find it hard to explain even now.

Perhaps this is how it feels for anyone to try and describe their adolescence? It just happens that mine was on the internet, and thus oddly externalized, and oddly compulsion-producing. Some essential pieces of my growing-up are imbued inside a digital drawing of a giant omelette, of a blue cartoon wolf with pink and purple wings. The way it felt to achieve a Neopian goal, hang out in a Furcadian dream in the form of a lion, or chat about which American Idol contestants had been “robbed” is an essential part of what I remember about being a kid.

When you’re a kid, your activities and interests are supposed to change. But growing up and out of adolescent activities is a problem if you are addicted to them. Rather than move on, you go searching for another site. Joining a new site always had the sense of trying to recapture a feeling—searching for that spark, *the way it felt before*. Maybe this is connected to why so many people my age were nostalgic for their childhoods sooner than seems developmentally appropriate. I see young people, at the start of their lives, wishing they were kids again.

Idolforums.

Idolforums was a place to discuss *American Idol*, and eventually other talent-contest reality shows (*So You Think You Can Dance*, *America's Got Talent*). We talked about the results of the latest episode, speculated about the future, lamented the losses and celebrated the successes of our favorite contestants. The fandom was overwhelmingly female and trended young (for this I'm grateful—I never had to deal with any men online, since on Furcadia everyone thought I was a boy).

Idolforums also incubated obsession at a new pitch; even for me, a very obsessive kid. The objects of our fixation were, of course, real people. *American Idol* was a combination of a narrative arc, building to the “finale,” and the worst kind of celebrity preoccupation. We were utterly enamored with these people and reinforced each others' excesses.

Idolforums also had an element of creativity that obsessed me: a sort of industry of “signature” graphics. The images went in your signature, which was at the bottom of every post you made on the boards. Your signature would usually hold a list of your main

favorite contestant for each season (there was always a race to claim people as early in the season as possible), maybe your nickname, maybe an inside joke. And always an image: which we called a “blend.” A blend usually consisted of a few high-quality photographs of a contestant, blended together with pretty Photoshop effects. The content of blends could also divert into other celebrity or pop culture obsessions, like movies, actors, or singers.

The blend shops on Idolforums inspired me. I got my requisite pirated copy of Photoshop CS2 from LimeWire, and so began teaching myself photo-editing programs.

We talked about everything on Idolforums. Including irl relationships and sex. I learned more about sex from Idolforums than anywhere else. I still remember a 17-year-old friend of mine telling us about losing her virginity. I was probably 13. She told us it hurt, and she bled—a stain “the size of a CD” left on her bed. “Put a towel down” was her advice to us. I never forgot that image (or the advice).

Idolforums was starting to eclipse Furcadia in my mind, perhaps because I was developing a “self” on the forum who was, you know, actually me. It had also stoked my obsessive tendencies

to such a degree that I sometimes did things that I knew were unreasonable.

This would spell my fate. When an acquaintance in Furcadia said she liked Bo Bice (an *American Idol* contestant who I literally dreamed about), my reaction was immediate, compulsive, and thoughtless.

All MMOs have a mechanic by which you can talk privately with other characters. In Furcadia, it was called “whispering.” I whispered to my acquaintance and casually spilled my two-year secret. I said something along the lines of: *I’m actually a girl in real life and I also love Bo Bice!!!*

And, well, word got around fast.

MMOs also have a mechanic for speaking to many players at once. In Furcadia, moderators of dreams had the ability to reach all the players in the dream simultaneously. As I said, I was kind of popular. I had a few friends who were mods in my home dream. One of them shouted to the entire dream, all caps:

[REDACTED] IS A GIRL????

When something bad happens to you online, there's this strange feeling that I can only describe as something like frozen shock, a draining away of agency, that is all the stranger because it's not actually happening. I was still in the same place—the spot in the hallway where the family computer sat—feeling like my entire world was crashing down. I remember my hand shaking on the mouse, my stomach sinking and churning.

But I remember little else. I know some of my friends did accept me (my “mate” quickly withdrew her affections). It was never the same. Shortly after, Idolforums took over my internet life completely. I was now *me* online, for good—there would be no going back.



ENDINGS: identity / nostalgia

At a friend's house, I made a secret MySpace account. There was something about it that felt like a risk; a little scary for me, who had always been told never to show my face on the internet. I was in seventh or eighth grade, which would have overlapped with Idolforums (I had only shown a couple of trusted friends there what I looked like).

MySpace was the first “place” online where I interacted with people I knew in real life. Until MySpace, we used instant messengers like AIM and MSN, which were not connected to whatever website you were visiting.

It was the beginning of the end of the internet as I'd known it. Now, the intention was to represent yourself—digitally—to people who saw you regularly in the real world. It's hard to describe how entirely new this imperative was, and how much higher the stakes were as a result.

We put a lot of time into MySpace pages. They were highly customizable with the HTML I'd learned on Neopets. The creative

element was, as always, a favorite part of using the site. Within a couple of years this shifted again, and customizability was all but entirely lost when Facebook took over (seemingly overnight in my memory: one day we were using MySpace, the next it was all Facebook). This devolved further into the platforms we use now, confining representation inside a consistent template—the signs and shapes of which have become hegemonic.

Perhaps this imprisonment of digital identity creation inside structures pre-built by big tech companies is part of the lingering nostalgia, the nostalgia that makes me want to write these reflections at all. Addictions linger; but the apps we have to choose from are intolerably boring in comparison to what I am, somehow, still expecting. I recall myself as a college student, going online in that childhood habit to avoid school work, and thinking, *But what websites do I like...?*

What I liked about the internet in my girlhood was creativity and conversation. Building things and connecting with others. I think my goal now, as an adult, should be to use it in these ways more often—and reject what makes me *bored*.

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